

## **Urban Legends – Part 5**

**The Legend One: The tithe is Old Testament law.**

- *Leviticus 27:30; Genesis 14:17-20*

**The Legend Two: The Old Testament tithe was ten percent.**

- *Leviticus 27:30-33; Deuteronomy 12:10-11, 14:28-29;  
Leviticus 19:9-10; Exodus 25:2*

**The Legend Three: God will punish you if you don't tithe.**

- *Malachi 3:8-10a, 3:10b-12, 2:2; Deuteronomy 28; Matthew 6:2*

**The Legend Four: Christians are commanded to tithe.**

- *Matthew 23:23*

**Application**

- *2 Corinthians 8:7*

- **Do not give under compulsion**

- *2 Corinthians 9:7a, 8:12*

- **God loves a cheerful giver**

- *2 Corinthians 9:7*

- **Tithe is the floor, not the ceiling**

- *Luke 18:22*

- **Tithe is worship**

- *2 Corinthians 8-9, 8:5, 8:8-9*

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## Urban Legends<sup>1</sup>

### Four Urban Legends About Giving

A lot of the values of our culture (the good and the bad!) can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece. For example, our ideas of rugged individualism and democracy began several centuries before Christ. Interestingly, the Greeks also created a mythology of gods that reflected their world. Greek mythology had created a world of gods and demigods and other deities that was a lot like the world of humans – filled with rivalry and love and violence and deceit and ego and danger. Some of the mythological gods were adversarial to humans, some were indifferent. Some would use humans for their own schemes, and some were sympathetic and even defended people. One god in particular was willing to take the side of humans when it came to the issue of money, and that was the god Hermes. The Romans called him Mercury. He was the handsome young guy who had wings on his sandals and was a super-fast messenger (sounds like he wore Nikes, doesn't it? Ironically, though, Nikes are named after a different goddess – Nike was the winged goddess of victory). But the mythological stories of Hermes show him tricking and deceiving other gods in order to benefit humans. Hermes was the patron god of commerce and trade – in other words, of money. But what's interesting is that he was *also* the patron god of thieves.<sup>2</sup>

Does anyone else find it interesting that Hermes was both the god of money and at the same time the god of thieves? I wonder if that's because there sometimes is very little difference between those who make money and those who steal it!

How we view and use money can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece. It is deeply embedded in our cultural psyche, and so much of it is not positive! For many in the US, at least, money determines our value, our feelings of happiness or contentment, and our plans for the future. It really seems like it makes the world go around.

Then God speaks into this world and gives us an entirely different perspective to base our lives and futures and value on, and it is *not* money. Instead, it is found in

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for this series/sermon:

David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville TN 2019)

David A. Croteau *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2015)

Michael Svigel and John Adair *Urban Legends of Church History* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2020)

Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible* (Bethany House Publishing, Bloomington, Minn., 2012)

Laurie J. Braaten and Jim Edlin, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2019)

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Pr 22:6

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.policygenius.com/personal-finance/news/money-lessons-from-ancient-greece/>

love. God's Kingdom is about receiving and living in the love of God through Christ, loving God supremely, and loving others equally. The currency of God's Kingdom is love, and love redefines everything in this world, including and especially money.

Still, there are many who make money from manipulating the church. We've got celebrity preachers promising prosperity for people – only if they'll give all their money to them. These pastors claim to care about common folks, even though while they preach, they are standing in two-thousand-dollar sneakers and thousand-dollar Gucci pants. Check out Preachers and Sneakers on Twitter, which points out pastors and their four-figure footwear. Like Hermes whose sandals looked a bit like Nikes, there's not much difference between these pastor's money and their thievery; they are intentionally twisting Scripture for their own gain.

But God gives us a worldview where money isn't seen as something we worship. Instead, money can be used as *an act of worship*. It's not about how much we can gain, but about how much we can give. And when we understand that, we gain more so we can give more.

So I'd like to clear up some of the urban legends about giving that are floating around in churches today, and hopefully give us a better understanding of why we make giving a part of our weekly worship, and why we encourage all of us to participate in Here For Good – our effort to raise funds get rid of our debt, which we did, and to renovate our facility. We encourage all of us to give in whatever ways we can, so let's clear up some urban legends of what the Bible really says about giving.

An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth, repeated throughout the culture as common knowledge, but which isn't true.<sup>3</sup>

In our summer sermon series, we are exploring some of the urban legends that have developed in the Bible and church history, and today we want to talk about giving – especially tithing (or giving ten percent to God through the church). If you are not familiar with the idea of “tithe or tithing,” it's okay – I'll explain it.

If you haven't figured out yet, the Bible is a book about giving. The Bible talks more about giving than it does about either heaven or hell. Jesus talked more about giving than almost any other subject. Over half of His parables have to do with money. There are more promises in the Bible related to giving than any other subject. And why wouldn't that be the case? God is love, and the currency of the Kingdom is love, so giving goes hand in hand with love. We're told in John 3:16 that God loved the world so much that he...did what? He *gave* his only Son. You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving. So today we are going to look at four urban legends about giving. The first is this one...

## **Legend One: The tithe is Old Testament law.**

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<sup>3</sup> David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, xiii.

If the Kingdom of God is about love, and the motivating life of the believer in Jesus is the Kingdom currency of love, then we need to understand what the Bible says about giving, and even tithing, in the context of love.

Now tithing as an Old Testament law might seem pretty self-evident since, after all, this was clearly stated in the Old Testament book of Leviticus – a title, by the way, that means “the law of the priests,” and the priests facilitated the worship lifestyle of God’s people, and they were from the tribe of *Levi*. So Leviticus is about living a holy life in a way that worships and brings glory to God. Worship is our loving response to the love of God. (Do you need me to repeat that?) So what does Leviticus say about tithing?

“One-tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord and must be set apart to him as holy.”  
(Leviticus 27:30, niv)

Okay, so again, that seems pretty obvious, but is tithing an Old Testament law? No, it's not. It's actually an Old Testament *principle*. Let me explain: God gave the law through Moses, right? That happened somewhere around 3500 years ago – around 1500BC. But in the Bible, we see that tithing was established *before* the law was given. The law was established with Moses, but God established tithing from the very beginning of his people. We're told in the Bible that Abraham – the father of the Jewish people – gave tithes almost 500 years *before* Moses was even born. The story is in Genesis 14:17-20. Abraham rescued his nephew named Lot by defeating Sodom. Then one particular king from the area is named Melchizedek and he is interesting; he is called a King of Salem – as in *Jeru-salem*, and he is called a priest of the Most High God. And he approached Abraham to bless him. Abraham recognizes that Melchizedek is a priest of God, so he gives a tenth, or a tithe, of all he has to the priest as an act of worship to God. The idea of tithe took place almost 500 years before the Jewish law was given. So tithing in the Bible is a *life principle* before the Jewish nation even became Israel and had the law. From the very first act of the tithe, it was a worshipful response to God for his goodness and love.

Okay, so that brings us to the second legend...

### **Legend Two: The Old Testament *tithe* was *ten percent*.**

Well we just read that passage from Leviticus that commands a tenth, and we've already been describing the “tithe” as a tenth, so what's the deal? Let's look at the passage in Leviticus with a couple other verses included:

“One-tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord and must be set apart to him as holy. If you want to buy back the Lord's tenth of the grain or fruit, you must pay its value, plus 20 percent. Count off every tenth animal from your herds and flocks and set them apart for the Lord as holy. You may not pick and choose between good and bad animals, and you may not substitute one for another. But if you do exchange one animal for another, then both the original animal

and its substitute will be considered holy and cannot be bought back.”  
(Leviticus 27:30-33, niv)

It seems pretty clear that the word “tithe” means ten percent. But the total of the giving for God’s people was not just ten percent; there was actually more than just one tithe giving that was expected. That’s because in the Old Testament there were several types of mandatory giving.

There was compulsory giving for each person who considered himself faithful to the Covenant; it was not optional. First there was a tithe called the Lord’s tithe, or the Levites’ tithe, because it went to support the priests and the ministry in the tabernacle and the temple. That’s what we just read. That passage said that a tenth of everything from the land—whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees—belonged to the Lord. It is holy to the Lord. Ten percent of all their produce and animals was also required.

Then there was a second tithe called the festival tithe. Deuteronomy 12:10-11 said that, to celebrate that God delivered the Israelites into their own land and would give them rest and safety, they would bring another tithe to the Temple, and that festival tithe was to be used for religious celebration, to bring family and friends together.

So you have two compulsory ten percent tithes. You’re up to 20 percent. There was yet another tithe called the poor tithe. Deuteronomy 14:28-29 says:

“At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns so that the Levites, who have no allotment or inheritance of their own and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied; so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” (Deuteronomy 14:28-29)

God says every three years there is to be a ten percent tithe for helping people in poverty and immigrants. That breaks down to about three percent per year.

This means mandatory tithes for faithful Israelites was 23 percent of their income annually—a tithe for the priesthood, a tithe for national religious feasts, and a tithe that aided the poor—all compulsory.

But it didn’t end there. There was a mandatory type of profit sharing with the poor. Leviticus 19:9-10 says:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them to the poor and immigrant. I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:9-10)

It wasn’t a large amount – around one or two percent, but that was to be left. You were to be generous with what was left in your field for the poor and immigrants.

Then there were other requirements. For example, there was a third-of-a-shekel temple charge required to pay for materials for temple worship.

All in all, a faithful Israelite was required to give between 23 and 25 percent of his income every year. That was mandatory. They were to do this every year for six years, and then in the seventh year they didn't have to give any tithes.

But besides the tithe, they could also do voluntary, free-will giving which included first-fruits giving and free-will offerings. An Israelite who loved the Lord, in addition to his 23 to 25 percent, would give the first fruits of his crop to God. He would survey his fields for the best part of it. He would harvest it and take the best part to the Lord, before the harvest, trusting that God would multiply his harvest. So it was faith giving—it was entirely voluntary.

Finally, there were free-will offerings given for special projects such as building the tabernacle. The Lord said to Moses when they were building the Tabernacle:

"Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering from each man whose heart prompts him to give." (Exodus 25:2)

It's not mandatory. It comes from the heart. The entire emphasis is free will, joyous, *over and above* the 23 to 25 percent.

The ideal in the Old Testament was grace giving, whether it was mandatory or voluntary. It was to come from the heart. It was meant to be offered to God with great rejoicing. Some were giving 30 percent. Some were giving 40 percent. It was huge. *That* is the Old Testament!<sup>4</sup>

So when we encourage you to consider giving to the church as worship, the principle of giving ten percent of your income doesn't sound so bad, does it? If we wanted to give according to the law, it would be anywhere from 23% to 40%!

Now, there is another urban legend out there that we need to dispel, and it is this...

### **Legend Three: God will punish you if you don't tithe.**

This notion comes from another place in the Old Testament, from the prophet Malachi. Here's the passage, and it's God speaking to his people through the prophet Malachi. The people were withholding their giving:

"Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me! But you ask, 'What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?' You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies, "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in!" (Malachi 3:8-10a, niv)

That passage seems to indicate that if we don't tithe, we will be punished, our crops will be unprotected (or in our case today, our material possessions won't last as long). The converse is implied that if we *do* give, God will give us more money and

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<sup>4</sup> Kent Hughes, "The Grace of Giving," *Preaching Today* (# 205)

our appliances, and our cars will last a lot longer. In fact, that passage goes on to say:

Put me to the test! Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. “Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.” (Malachi 3:10b-12, niv)

But remember, this passage in Malachi 3 was a word from the Lord to the nation of Israel *at that time*. God had just brought them out of exile and back to their own land, and they went right back to being disobedient. God confronted them for their failure to obey the old covenant laws they had promised to keep. In line with Deuteronomy 28, he reminded them of the curses that follow disobedience. So for us to say that the Old Testament obedience to the law directly carries over to us who are saved by grace – well there are problems to that.<sup>5</sup> Since we are no longer under the law, we must look at the principle behind the law. Malachi 3 contains a strong reminder that the motivation for giving is extremely important. This motivation should come from a high regard for God’s honor (see Malachi 2:2). God looks at the heart of the giver, not just the gift. There are a lot of ways a Christian can be motivated to give. For instance, if a Christian gives to be seen by other Christians as generous (see Matthew 6:2), that is a problem. But when Christian giving is driven by a reflection upon the grace and love God has shown us, then the gift shows a high regard for God’s honor.<sup>6</sup>

Years ago I had a pastor who used to preach on this passage in Malachi regularly, and he would always say that, whenever his car broke down or he had an appliance break down, the first thing he’d do is go to his checkbook to make sure his tithe was paid up. He wanted to be sure he wasn’t being punished for accidentally missing a tithe payment.

My friends, we don’t give to God to avoid punishment or so that he will make us rich. We give because we are responding to his generous love for us, and in faith knowing that he will provide for us. By the same token, God gives to us and takes care of us because he loves us; he doesn’t punish us in some kind of financial tit-for-tat because we owe him money. We could never – *never* – give to God what we owe him. That’s why it’s called GRACE. We give as a *response* to his grace, not out of fear of his punishment. BIG difference.

So finally, let’s see the last urban legend about giving...

#### **Legend Four: Christians are commanded to tithe.**

So from all those passages we just looked at, if we don’t put them in the right context, we might be led to think that we as Christians are commanded to tithe. But

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<sup>5</sup> David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *ibid*, 244.

<sup>6</sup> David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *ibid*, 241–245.

you won't find anywhere in the New Testament that we are explicitly commanded to tithe. Jesus didn't command, but he did *commend* it. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus was confronting the Pharisees and he actually commended them for tithing -- this is the *only* thing Jesus ever commended the Pharisees for, and it was in their giving of tithes. He said, "That's one thing you guys are doing all right. Everything else you're off base." but, in Matthew 23:23, He said:

"You are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things."  
(Matthew 23:23, nlt)

They were tithing, but they were doing it for the wrong reasons; they did it to justify themselves so that they didn't have to give to the poor or the immigrant. They were not giving as a loving and generous response to God and to the needs of others.

Here's the point: Jesus treats the tithe as a given – something he expects us to do – when we have the right attitude and spirit.

So, what do we take away from all this? What is the...

## **Application?**

There is no question in the New Testament that we are encouraged and even expected to make generous giving a part of our lifestyle. Paul tells the Corinthians and us in 2 Corinthians 8:7...

"But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving." (2 Corinthians 8:7, niv)

God is a giving God, and he expects us to be like him and be giving people. Let me put this in perspective from what the Bible says. In the key words that are used in the Bible, the word "believe" is used 272 times; the word "pray" is used 371 times; the word "love" is used 714 times; the word "give" is used 2162 times. God is a giver and God wants us to become like Him.

So how should we approach the idea of tithing, or giving? Well first...

### **- Do not give under compulsion.**

Paul again writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7a...

"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion..." (2 Corinthians 9:7a, niv)

In other words, don't give out of pressure or guilt.

God is more interested in our attitude than the amount. Earlier in 2 Corinthians 8:12 Paul writes about our giving:



"For if the willingness is there, your gift is acceptable according to what you have, not according to what you don't have." (2 Corinthians 8:12, niv)

It's worshipfully giving out of what you *have*, not according to what you don't have. When God looks at our giving, He's not impressed with the amount. He doesn't look at the amount you give, He looks at the amount you have left over, in proportion to what you gave. As your pastor, I want to relieve a little bit of guilt: *never give to our church out of pressure*. The Scripture says you are to never give under pressure. You're to give willingly, not reluctantly. If you feel pressured to give, don't do it! Just say "nope"! Because the Bible says if you give under pressure, it's not the kind of giving God wants. You give because God says so, whether the church needs it or not.

And because giving is an attitude...

- **God loves a cheerful giver.**

Look at the rest of that verse in 2 Corinthians:

"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, *for God loves a cheerful giver.*" (2 Corinthians 9:7, niv, *italics added*)

The Greek word for "cheerful" in that verse is the word that we get our word "hilarious" from. In the New Testament church, when they gave, it was *hilarious*. For some people in the church today, when we receive the offering, that's the low point of the service. But I know of some churches that, when they've finished receiving the offering, they all applaud! Listen, if you can't give cheerfully, don't give. You don't get credit for giving that's not cheerful. If you can't tithe cheerfully, what you need to work on is your attitude. Because when it comes to the New Testament expectation of giving a tithe...

**Tithe is the floor, not the ceiling.**

As New Testament believers, tithe is where we *start* giving, not where we *finish*. Because God has been so generous with us, he expects us to be generous people. So the tithe is just a great way to *start* giving; then we have the opportunity to give beyond that in offerings of all kinds. What's the difference between a tithe and an offering? Tithe is giving the first tenth of my income. An offering is anything I give in addition to my tithe. It is a sacrificial *offering*. So when people say, "Tithing is an Old Testament principle, so I'm not under the law and I won't do it." That's fine. Let's live by the New Testament. And what does it say? 25-40%!!

Everything belongs to God, and we are to give it back to him. A tithe isn't giving God ten percent of *my money*; giving a tithe is God letting me use 90% of *his money*. Jesus told the rich young ruler in Luke 18:22...

"Go and sell *all* you have and give it to the poor." (Luke 18:22)

A tithe doesn't sound so bad now, does it?

But the point of all of this is that...

## - Tithe is worship.

Tithe and every other giving that we do is a response to the love of God. So for us, *giving is grace driven, relationship driven, and love driven*. Giving should be a response to the grace God has shown believers through sending his Son to die for our sins on the cross (2 Corinthians 8–9). The more we meditate on the cross, the greater our desire to give should grow. Giving should also be relationship driven, that is, based on one’s relationship with the Lord. God is not seeking for you to simply balance a budget or crunch numbers in a calculator; he is seeking a relationship with you (2 Corinthians 8:5). Go to him in prayer and earnestly seek his heart for what he wants you to give and to whom and when. And giving should be driven by a believer demonstrating love for God (2 Corinthians 8:8–9).<sup>7</sup> Paul writes:

“I am not commanding you (to give), but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:8–9, niv)

When we take the tithe out of legalism and see that it actually has always been a principle of generous giving – beyond simply a ten percent tax, (and that God won’t punish you if you don’t) we begin to realize that we have the privilege of showing our love for God and our appreciation for his generosity with us. And we show that by giving generously to the church as well as other organizations and people as he leads us. That is how we “excel in this grace of giving.”

Now can I take a moment to commend you on your generous giving? You give so faithfully each week when we receive tithes and offerings; that is how we are able to do all these great things we do as a church for each other and for our community. Please continue to give! But for the last two years you have also given so generously toward **Here For Good**. Here For Good has been our special generosity initiative to do two things: to pay off our mortgage, so we could move money from mortgage to ministry, and to raise funds to renovate as much as we possibly can in these older parts of our building, to make them more effective and efficient. We are in our last year of giving to Here For Good, and I want to give you a quick update on where we are. First, the **Total pledged to date: \$1,746,782.65**. God led you to pledge *above* the original goal we set of \$1,600,00. We set that goal to first pay off our mortgage, which we did – we burned the mortgage a year ago! For the last year we have been debt free for the first time in almost 25 years! Since then, your church board has been actively praying and allocating funds that used to be spent on mortgage and investing it into ministries. But those funds for ministry will only be available if we continue to give tithes and offerings, right? If we stop giving, all those increased ministry allocations are only numbers on paper; if we don’t give, we can’t carry out those ministries.

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<sup>7</sup> David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *ibid*, 241–245.

But now, everything we give will help us to do as much as we can to renovate our facility. We have been meeting every month since last fall with an architect and a renovation team (made up of people in our church appointed by the Leadership Team). They've been researching and evaluating what we can do and what we need to do in the future, to create a master plan. We'll have an update for you soon on all their work, but they are evaluating everything – the Worship Center, the foyer, the restrooms, the children and youth and adult meeting areas (all within our current footprint), as well as what future expansion might look like. Again, we will share their progress with you very, very soon.

So, so far, we've given toward that goal that we've all prayerfully committed to, and we've given: **Total given to date: \$1,332,863.34.** That's phenomenal! The first year and a half of that was in a pandemic! We are getting very close to our goal; but we're not done yet. The **Total remaining** on giving toward our commitments is: **\$413,919.31.** We've got eight months left to meet the rest of our goal. But remember, we have committed to NOT going into debt again. So if we don't meet our goal, then there's very little we can do to renovate this place, and renovation is not cheap.

So please, I want to encourage you: God has been so generous with us; give gladly and generously so that together we can do great things in our church and through our church like we've never been able to do before! Pray about your giving. Pray about tithing if you're not. If you are, pray about giving toward Here For Good if you're not. If you are, pray about giving even more during this home stretch of our efforts!

*Stand and pray*

2 Corinthians 13:14 – The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.